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ABSTRACT

A multimillionaire responsible for several felonies stated recently that humanism is one of the leading causes of crime in the United States. A college English instructor tested the validity of the connection between humanism and deteriorating values, on a limited and informal basis, while conducting in a men's prison a series of weekly programs designed to spark discussion about basic human values. The teacher observed a group of 30 convicts, fairly representative of the prison population. It quickly became apparent that these men were not led by humanism to commit the crimes for which they were being punished, and that they had a total disregard for what would be considered elementary humanistic principles. As shown by their responses to a lecture by a Unitarian minister, the film "Future Shock", and a film on prejudice, the men had not chosen to ignore these principles nor had they rejected them outright. They were, instead, ignorant of humanistic values, having never been introduced to them. They lacked self-awareness as well as an awareness of other people, and failed to consider the consequences of their ideas. A continuing dialogue between humanists and prisoners can only help both groups as the former demonstrate the positive effect of humanistic principles upon the lives of prisoners, and the prisoners teach humanists about the incredible resilience of the human spirit. (HTH)

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The Humanities "Behind the Walls"

At a recent luncheon in support of my College of Liberal Arts, a local judge remarked that, for the sake of improved public relations, maybe the term "liberal" in liberal arts should be deemphasized. His suggestion met with warm approval; in fact, no sooner had he spoken than someone else recommended that it might really be smart simply to change the name. Perhaps something like "the living arts" or "the school of human fulfillment skills" would evoke a better image. Of course, this person conceded, the term "human" has its drawbacks too. It sounds like "humanism," which in Arkansas is automatically preceded by the adjective "secular," and "secular humanism" is even worse than "liberal" arts!

That humanism is under attack around the country is not news (it made the September 12 issue of Time magazine). The virulence of the attack should not go unchronicled, however. In Arkansas, for instance, members of Family, Life, America, and God (FLAG) contend that millions of brainwashed teachers are sneaking "the humanism religion" into every academic discipline (Arkansas Gazette, 25 March 1980, p. 1B). At the same time, pamphlets with titles such as "Is Humanism Molesting Your Child?" pour from

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local printing presses. "Secular humanism" has become so common a slur that it is now a buzz-word with wide-ranging applications, as the following letter to the editor of the Arkansas Gazette (23 March 1981, p. 8A) illustrates:

> Year after year we have been indulgent in many television programs . . . which air blatant immorality. These programs in the guise of entertainment, I think, are a form of indoctrination to the humanist's standards. . . . For far too long, we have voiced no objection to the humanists quest to undermine the moral character of the people of the United States.

Such critics of contemporary life, despairing of the world around them, find a common enemy in an abstraction that they have termed "humanism." And they are fervent in their denunciation. One of the more articulate expressions of this viewpoint has come from T. Cullum Davis of Ft. Worth. (You may recall Mr. Davis; he is the multi-millionaire who allegedly shot his step-daughter, killed his wife's lover, and tried to buy the murder of the judge presiding over his divorce.) Mr. Davis explains: "Humanism is self-centeredness in man to the exclusion of God. It's been the underlying reason our society has been crumbling, and we have . . . more crime than ever before" (Arkansas Gazette,

23 November 1980, p. 11A). Humanism, Mr. Davis continues, is one of the leading causes of crime today.

The relationship between humanism and lawlessness that Davis points out is heard more and more frequently in my part of the country. When I found myself at Tucker Unit of the Arkansas State Prison System supervising a humanities series, therefore, I seized upon the opportunity to test the validity of the charge--on a limited basis, admittedly, and with no pretense at scientific accuracy. The following observations result from the experience.

Thanks to funding by the Arkansas Endowment for the Humanities, fourteen weekly programs were conducted whose purpose was to spark discussion about basic human values. These weekly sessions were available to any man who wished to attend if he had a high school degree or the GED equivalent earned from the school within the facility. I had almost four months to observe the reactions of more than thirty convicts and their response to the various speakers, movies, reading, and exhibits. And these men, though distinguished by their educational attainment, were fairly representative of the prison population. They averaged just under twenty years of age, 60% were imprisoned on drug or alcohol

related crimes, 40% were Black, and on entering Tucker they had less than a sixth grade education. This then was the sampling I observed over the weeks to test the influence of secular humanism. This was the group I studied to determine if there was a connection between humanism and deteriorating values. In short, should we fear the inculcation of humanistic principles?

In one sense my findings were predictable: it quickly became apparent that these men were not led by humanism to commit the crimes for which they were being punished. At the same time, my experience at Tucker was often surprising and frequently unsettling. What surprised me was the total disregard most of the men had for what each of us would consider elementary humanistic principles. Unsettling was the fact that the men had not chosen to ignore these principles, nor had they rejected them outright. Unfortunately, they had never been introduced to them. For the most part, the men were ignorant of humanistic values: they lacked self-awareness as well as an awareness of other people, they failed to consider the consequences of their ideas and actions, and they were unused to extrapolate practical applications from theoretical ideas. Let me relate several incidents that occurred during the four months of the project to illustrate my conclusions.

The first speaker to address the men at Tucker was a Unitarian minister who titled his remarks "A Burr Under Your Saddle." He told the group that his religious denomination had no fixed dogma or creed, but that it was his duty as the church leader to act as a burr: to challenge his parishoners' complacent assumptions, to encourage intellectual ferment, and to provoke a reconsideration--or maybe a reaffirmation--of personal beliefs. His presentation was eloquent and effective, I thought. But the men were most uncomfortable. They expected absolutes and dogma, but he offered them relative values and personal choices. "What do you believe in?" they kept demanding with growing frustration, until they finally gave up, convinced that he was a fraud or they were too stupid to follow his presentation. Of course, neither was true.

The next week the discussion started up again, and I began to realize that there was a major difference between the assumptions behind the two views. The men were not voicing a theological objection nor were they being stubborn. A question raised by one of the perplexed participants epitomized the difference between the two: "If Unitarians don't have any fixed beliefs," he asked, "what does the minister tell his congregation to do when he preaches to them each Sunday?" Here lay the crux of the division.

The men were accustomed to prescriptions, and they balked when faced with personal decisions. They expected absolutes, and anything else was threatening. It became apparent that the humanistic emphasis upon individual choice was not a part of their behavior. Just the opposite was the case. Contrary to the charges of the critics of humanism, the lawbreakers at Tucker Unit were some of the least relativistic men I have ever encountered.

The eagerness with which these men embraced conventional ideology and their hostility to unorthodoxy influenced their reaction to the movie version of Alvin Toffler's best-seller Future Shock. As soon as the movie ended, the class was up in arms; they were shocked, offended, and angry. Toffler's vision of a brave new world was not for them. I was not surprised at their opposition to the changing sexual roles that Toffler had endorsed, but other of their objections did catch me off guard. The one that provoked the most heated discussion was their antagonism to the futuristic medical procedures presented in the film. To a man, the members of the class took exception to artificial organs, to novel methods of reproduction, or to the manipulation of genetic codes. Their attitude that the body should not be tampered with was similar to their rejection of the Unitarian free thinking, but with an added dimension. In this case, opting for tradition was potentially detrimental

to their own well-being; however, they failed to think about self-interest being reaching a conclusion.

This lack of self-awareness concerned me; I wanted to show them that they were acting contrary to their own best interests. After the class had unanimously voted to reject Toffler's medical future, therefore, I presented them with a hypothetical situation. Would they allow a modification of their own genetic code if the only result was the doubling of their life-span? The previous unanimity dissolved. When the men took into account their own self-interest, they acted upon it. But it was not their habit to make such self-aware decisions.

One last example of the absence of humanistic principles must suffice, and this instance is another illustration of the inability of this group to apply to their own lives what they rationally understood. Late in the series, Bill Cosby's short film "On Prejudice" was used to spark discussion about discrimination. In the film, Cosby portrays a number of bigots who malign each other's race, occupation, religion, sex, and nationality. The film is rife with irony, and it was not lost on the class. The discussion that developed following the film proceeded predictably enough until it became obvious that no one was relating Cosby's message to his own life. The men were not connecting theory and practice. The

class began to relate to the movie on a subjective level only after confronted with the realization that, as convicts, they were each destined to be the victims of prejudice. And even then it took some prodding before many of the men were able to make the transition from victim to victimizer, before they were able to put themselves in the shoes of those people they discriminated against. Again, the participants disclosed an inability to translate objective knowledge into personally relevant insight.

During the fourteen weeks of the project, I came to respect the intelligence of the Tucker men. But I also learned that they lacked both humanistic values and a humanistic perspective. They were unaccustomed to thinking in terms of themselves or other people. The poet P.B. Shelley, one of our culture's great humanists, describes this attitude in his Defence of Poetry better than I can. Shelley remarks that "the great secret of morals is . . . going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be truly good, must imagine intensely. . . ." Shelley goes on to define the workings of the mind in terms of analysis and synthesis, explaining that the synthetic power--the going out of our own self--is the humanizing agent. He concludes, "There is no want of knowledge. We want the creative faculty to image that which we know." The Tucker men

reflected the deficiency of synthetic ability that Shelley identifies. They couldn't relate objective knowledge for subjective benefit. They had never learned to "imagine."

A breakthrough of sorts occurred near the end of the series that might help to clarify my point. An excellent young poet, Bruce Weigl, read from his most recent book, A Romance. For a moment the members of the class were able to imagine what they knew! Weigl read a prose poem that began: "This is where the old woman lifted her dress, pulled down her stiff underwear and pissed in the alley." No sooner had he finished the reading than one of the men clambored, "I knew her! I knew her!" Another chimed in, "Yeah, I know her too." Art ceased being artifact and instead connected people. The imagination had created a synthesis and empathy resulted. A going out of one's self had been achieved that was no doubt soon forgotten by the class--but not by me.

The series of programs at Tucker taught me much. In addition to discovering that the prisoners lacked even a rudimentary familiarity with humanistic principles, I learned something from the humanists who participated in the series. All were surprised and delighted at the courtesy, enthusiasm, and intelligence of the men. And I realized that as useful as the humanists were for the prisoners, so were the prisoners for the humanists. These men and women--

dedicated humanists, each--had expected to find the prisoners less than human!

The surprise of the humanists at the prisoners' humanity should not have been unexpected. Although Ralph Ellison coined the phrase "invisible man" to describe Blacks in American society, the truly "invisible man" today is the convict. Since he reminds us of our social failures and tends to make us feel guilty, we lock him far from urban centers. And to justify our actions, we ascribe to him sub-human qualities. Since we come to believe the dehumanized myth that we ourselves created, it is essential that we break this vicious circle, that we encounter the convict and disprove our stereotypes.

The meeting between humanist and prisoner holds mutual benefit. The isolation of the prisoner allows us to make him a scapegoat, while the increasing isolation of the humanist--warned of in the Rockefeller Report on the State of the Humanities--leads to his insignificance. A dialogue between the two groups can only help both. We humanists might prove the lie of our critics as we demonstrate the positive effect of humanistic principles upon the lives of prisoners. And they can teach us about the incredible resiliance of the human spirit.